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# **Access to Childcare in Europe: Parents' Logistical Challenges in Cross-National Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

A burgeoning comparative literature has identified the centrality of childcare policy and provision in promoting parental and specifically maternal participation in paid employment across countries. This literature has focused on the importance of macro-level institutional arrangements, with a special emphasis on variation in availability of and access to formal early childhood education and care services. However, there has been limited comparative exploration of what this means in practice at the micro-level: the everyday challenges parents face when attempting to navigate the childcare system and the labor market simultaneously. Taking inspiration from human geography literature on the concept of ‘space-time fixity’, we present cross-national findings on the logistical challenges of arranging childcare. Evidence is drawn from interviews with parent- and childcare-related organizations in six European countries: Germany, Hungary, Italy, Slovenia, Sweden and the UK. Our research provides a richer understanding of childcare availability than a sole focus on formal childcare services would provide by elucidating the difficulties parents face in organizing access to these services, which can be a challenge to some extent even in contexts where childcare services are comprehensive and affordable.

**Keywords:** Childcare, availability, access, space-time fixity, Europe, logistical challenges

Recently a surge in policy interest in the availability of childcare can be observed across European countries, spurred in part by the aims of national governments to increase the employment rates of parents, specifically mothers. Following demand for information, international organizations such as the OECD, Eurostat and other EU agencies have made considerable progress in recording and reporting on advances in childcare policy internationally. This policy debate tends to be couched in terms of quantity – the number of childcare places available, sometimes with a more in-depth discussion about institutional features (full or part-time places, costs, or types of services).

However, in order to be able to access an available childcare place, parents must master a series of logistical challenges on a daily basis, navigating between working time requirements of employers and opening hours of childcare facilities, often traveling considerable distances via intricate geographical routes. These challenges have so far received only limited attention in the academic policy literature (see however, Skinner 2005). We draw on recent work from human geography on micro-practices or strategies of managing care which points to the problem of ‘space-time fixity’, or the need to be in a particular place at a particular time (see He 2013; Hubers et al. 2011) and the role of ‘coordination points’ in understanding how and why parents organize their childcare as they do (Skinner 2005).<sup>1</sup>

This paper contributes to a fuller understanding of how parents manage childcare arrangements by developing the concept of a logistical challenge as a discrete childcare constraint in addition to the more generally recognized challenges of availability, cost and quality. On the basis of our qualitative research in six European countries - Germany, Hungary, Italy, Slovenia, Sweden and the UK - we demonstrate the relevance of logistical challenges for parents across institutional and cultural contexts. In particular, we draw on the local knowledge of organizational actors in order to understand the reality of parents’

childcare experience beyond what is commonly understood from survey data, administrative records and policy documents. Our interview partners included a range of parent- and childcare-related organizations in six distinctly different European childcare systems.

There is no doubt that a comprehensive childcare system offering affordable full-day places to all children can ease the tensions parents experience in reconciling family obligations with work, compared to, for example, a situation where formal childcare is expensive and where full-time places are scarce. Nevertheless, we find that certain logistical challenges, such as matching opening hours of services and hours of employment; navigating distance and transport between childcare services and other locations, including the workplace; and the complexity of arrangements involved in doing so, are common across all the country contexts we explored. Despite their institutional and cultural differences, in each country we found parents to be involved in a complicated dance trying to navigate demands of employment and childcare structures, revealing a persistent tension between the two spheres. Our findings suggest that policy which attempts to increase the use of childcare services for employment purposes should take into account the logistical challenges of accessing ‘available’ childcare in addition to other considerations such as affordability and quality.

### **Key cross-national indicators for assessing childcare provision**

Logistical challenges are arguably difficult to operationalize and it is rare to find indicators of this concept in cross-national survey data. Perhaps slightly easier to capture, availability has become recognized as a crucial concept with regard to childcare provision and policy, especially with regard to supporting maternal employment (Breunig et al. 2011; Davis & Connelly 2005; Van Ham & Mulder 2005). In practice this has been evaluated in the aggregate via measures of the supply of usually formal or institutional care services e.g. the number of places per child population, or via measures of take-up e.g. the percentage of

children using particular forms of childcare (Davis & Connelly 2005; Meyers & Gornick 2003).

Comparative data are available for key indicators to illustrate differences and similarities across the six countries in terms of their childcare system and overall policy support for the reconciliation of family and work. Such indicators include childcare enrolment rates, hours spent in childcare, maternal employment rate and the percentage of children using out of school hours care. Looking at such indicators suggests that only in Sweden and Slovenia does full-time or at least longer part-time work for mothers of younger children appear to be supported by the childcare systems (see table 1). Sweden, Slovenia and the UK have nearly half of children under three years in formal care or pre-school, but in the UK, this is for only 16 hours per week on average. Few children under three years are in formal care in Hungary, presumably due to the long maternity leave entitlements in that country, but if in formal care, they are there for 30 hours on average per week. Germany and Italy have around a quarter of children under three in formal care, and for part-time working hours. Enrolment increases dramatically in all countries from aged three, though much of this provision will not match typical working hours.

[Table 1 here]

Whilst helpful for appreciating differences across countries, such aggregate data gives us little information about the challenges parents face in accessing available childcare places. Qualitative research has emphasized that whether care is accessible to parents includes not only a space component – the physical presence of a caregiver – but a time component – the presence of a caregiver *when* that care is required. If either component is missing, ostensibly 'available' care services may be difficult for parents to access. In particular, the geographical literature has highlighted the spatial component of proximity (distance between home, work

and care/school) and the importance of travel and transport – taking children to and from school and care (see Compton & Pollak 2014; Jain et al. 2011; Schwanen 2007; van Ham & Mulder 2005). This challenge has become of increased importance as children's independent travel has shown a marked decline (for brief reviews of this phenomenon, see Barker 2011; He 2013).

Similarly, time is a constraint not only due to (limited) quantity but also due to the necessity of being in particular places at set times (Jain et al. 2011: 1613), known as 'space-time fixity' (see He 2013; Hubers et al. 2011). For example, drop-off and pick-up times of formal care services and schools are often relatively fixed, and in some cases may be exceedingly rigid. Skinner (2005) refers to these as 'coordination points', highlighting in particular the morning journey from home to care/school and then to work, pick-up from school and/or pick-up from care after work.

Most of this qualitative work is based on analysis within a single country (e.g. the US – He 2013; the UK – Jain et al. 2011; Skinner 2005; and the Netherlands - Schwanen 2007; Schwanen & de Jong 2008). However, parents potentially face different time-space constraints depending on the institutional context within which they live. For example, parents living under different 'care regimes' - configurations of particular institutional and cultural approaches to caregiving - can make use of varying degrees of institutionally provided care, including publicly provided or subsidized services, versus other forms of care, including by the family (see Bettio & Plantenga 2004; Mahon et al. 2012). The institutionalist focus of such comparative analyses often implies or assumes that families in different care regimes have very different ways of coping with the challenges of home and work. However, a few comparative studies have shown that parents face similar childcare challenges across countries and have adopted similar strategies to face these challenges, such as combining

different forms of care and getting help from family and friends (Kröger 2010; Larsen 2004). Accordingly, this paper seeks to ascertain the extent to which logistical challenges in arranging childcare are common across institutionally diverse systems.

### **The institutional diversity of childcare systems**

We consider the logistical challenges associated with organizing childcare across the six countries included in our analysis.<sup>2</sup> Childcare systems can be described as either split, integrated or hybrid in nature. The UK and Italy are examples of countries with split systems, which are the historical norm and still predominant across Europe. A split system typically has little publicly provided childcare or leave provision for 0-3 years, with a relatively more extensive system of public provision for age three to school entry, and additional services for other age groups and ‘out of hours’ care. Often, this is combined with a distinction between services where those for children under three are considered ‘care’ while services for children just under compulsory school age are considered ‘early education’ or ‘preschool’. A split system seems likely to intensify logistical challenges, particularly if there is more than one child in the family.

Italy, for example, has only sparse and mainly private provision for the under-3s and limited leave provision for parents. Historically, it has had well-developed public early childhood education and care (ECEC) from age three, but there is much regional variation in terms of the number of available public places, and systems of allocation to places are decided locally. Similarly, the UK has mainly private provision for the under-3s and limited leave provision for parents, followed by part-time public provision from age three. When mothers work part-time, they may do so every day for a few hours, rather than in near full-day blocks as in, for example, Germany or Sweden.

Slovenia and Sweden are examples of countries with integrated systems. Here, there is integration of early childhood education and childcare into formal services from around age one on a full-day basis, following on from parental leave, in a generally unified institutional structure. Slovenia benefits from full-time public, affordable, high quality childcare from age one and has high childcare attendance rates and high female employment. Sweden similarly benefits from an integrated and unified system, which is mainly public, from age 18 months, in combination with generous parental leave. Accordingly, logistical challenges are expected to be least likely in Sweden and Slovenia.

Hungary is a hybrid case as it has long parental leaves (three years) leading to public provision from age three until school. Full-time ECEC from age three has recently become compulsory, but a lack of places has the potential to create logistical challenges for families. Mothers are still able to take a long leave before this, but there are few alternative public services should they wish to return to employment earlier.

Germany similarly is a hybrid case as parents have a statutory entitlement to childcare following parental leave, but this is not provided via a unified institutional structure as in Slovenia or Sweden, which could be expected to intensify logistical challenges. West Germany historically had a strongly split system with hardly any childcare for the under-3s, and part-time kindergartens for age 3-5; East Germany in contrast had an integrated system. Since the late 1990s, there has been development towards an integrated system nationwide, with an entitlement to full-time childcare places from age one if the parents are in employment or education, though regional variations persist with a scarcity of places in some areas which are likely to increase logistical challenges.

## **Methods**



The following analysis is based on interviews with parent- and childcare-related organizations in six European countries: the UK, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Sweden and Slovenia. The countries were chosen based on their differences with respect to their childcare systems, with the aim of understanding the extent to which particular logistical challenges of arranging childcare are consistent or similar across different contexts.

For each of the six countries included in the analysis, at least 10 participants representing different organizations were interviewed, with some countries having slightly more than 10. Sampling was purposive, with the aim of capturing the knowledge and perspectives of individuals who have in-depth familiarity and/or direct dealing with parents and how they organize their childcare. Sampling organizational actors rather than individual parents was a deliberate strategy. Most research in this area has concentrated on individual parents or couples which allows for an understanding of the personal, lived experience of parents. Talking with groups allows for a broader, ‘birds-eye’ view of how childcare is arranged by gaining the perspective not only of individual parents, but also of professionals who represent, provide services for and interact with a wide variety of parents on a daily basis. The rationale for this approach was a means of going beyond official, oft-repeated rhetoric of how childcare is arranged in particular countries based on the same limited selection of data sources,<sup>3</sup> which could result in a distorted and potentially circular understanding of this policy area. Nevertheless, because our findings are based on discussions with a small number of organizations per country, we are limited in our ability to draw conclusions on the differences between the countries, and instead focus primarily on commonalities.

Sampling aimed for variation and triangulation among a variety of organizations and interests as well as geographical scope, though we do not claim comprehensive coverage with the number of interviews available to us. In particular, while there were similar types of

organizations represented across each country, such as parent or family advocacy groups and childcare professional associations, the organizations were also chosen with sensitivity toward the specificity of context, using the knowledge of national experts in each country. For example, public or municipal providers are key actors in some countries while private non-profit or commercial providers are more prevalent in others. Additionally, the countries included in the analysis vary in size and degree of geographical heterogeneity; accordingly, the organizations chosen also vary with regard to their scope, with a mix of national, regional and local perspectives. Table 2 provides a brief overview of the sample.

*[Table 2 here]*

Semi-structured interviews were carried out in the respective countries between September 2013 and November 2014. The interview transcriptions were coded and analyzed using a qualitative software package (Nvivo). The coding process followed a combined deductive and inductive approach, where an initial coding frame was developed based on prior literature, but was refined over the course of the analysis based on emergent themes from the data. Specifically, three codes were used as indicators of logistical challenges: opening times and flexibility, geographical distance from home or work and complexity of arrangements. Coding was validated via a team process. Analysis was thematic and conducted at the explicit/semantic level rather than the latent/interpretive level (see Braun & Clarke 2006).

### **Space-time fixity and the logistical challenges of organizing childcare**

Despite the distinct aspects of the national childcare systems as illustrated previously, we were intrigued to find similar logistical challenges being reported across each of the six countries in our analysis (see table 3). Discussion of issues related to opening times and flexibility were most common with nearly all of the interviews in each country referencing

this theme. References to geographical distance were somewhat fewer and more varied, with a high proportion of references in Slovenia, Germany and Sweden compared to the UK, Italy and Hungary. Discussion of complexity of arrangements also varied substantially, being most common in the UK and Sweden and least common in Italy and Hungary, with Germany and Slovenia in the middle.

[Table 3 here]

#### *Time: Childcare opening hours*

Within our sample the most common logistical challenge identified was the issue of time, specifically the difficulty of matching the opening hours of childcare services with working time. A Slovenian example is typical, noting the challenges of childcare hours which do not match standard working hours:

*“In [city], kindergartens are open until 5 p.m., whereas in smaller towns they are usually open until 3:30 p.m. And that’s a big difference for parents who are trying to balance everything, wondering whether they will manage to be at work on time in the morning and then again on time to pick the kids up before kindergarten closes in the afternoon, or will they have to leave earlier, it’s frustrating.” (Government ministry, Slovenia)*

Such challenges are exacerbated for parents whose working hours are atypical in the sense that they fall outside core ‘standard’ working hours. Several respondents expressed frustration with this aspect of childcare services, especially as increasing numbers of families work and therefore require care outside these hours. In general, however, care services are not available in the evenings or over weekends. Even in Sweden the availability of childcare during these times is not typical:

*“There are a few ‘nattis’, night child care as we have casually started to call them, but these are far from available in every municipality, so not everyone has this option.” (Child advocacy group, Sweden)*

At the same time, several respondents pushed back against the idea that childcare services should be open at all hours, instead highlighting the role of employers as key actors outside the childcare system with the potential to mitigate or exacerbate the logistical challenges parents face in regard to managing time constraints. For example, in Hungary, an interviewee pointed out that:

*“On the one hand if the institutional system is flexible then it is really easier to harmonize it with work, on the other hand there is the world of work and if that is flexible – and I hope that we are going more and more in that direction...”*  
*(Parent/family advocacy group, Hungary)*

The role of workplace institutions and cultures was highlighted by both UK and Swedish interviewees who noted that that flexible working time was crucial in helping many parents match up timing between childcare opening hours and hours of employment.

While the difficulty of matching care and work hours was identified by respondents across all the countries in our sample, its intensity clearly varies by the institutional structure of the childcare system. For example, as noted previously, a key difference across childcare systems is the extent to which they are integrated with education systems. Where care is kept separate from education institutionally, logistical challenges tend to arise. Many of the respondents in our sample suggested that time-related logistical challenges are a particular feature of services which were designed primarily as educational institutions (including schools). Such services often feature shorter overall opening times and tend to be less flexible with regard to when a child can be picked up or dropped off due to an emphasis on shared class times.

Similarly, such services are more likely to close for extended holiday periods, and in some countries, such as Italy and Germany, during the middle of the day for lunch periods as well. For example, referring to provinces in southern Italy, a respondent explains:

*“In general, the children are out of school around 13.30 to 14:00: these are hours that are absolutely incompatible for those who work, even for a part-time worker or a municipal employee. The full-time extends it to 15:30 or 16:00 (speaking here of the public day cares). But there are far too few full-time classes, not even half the requests are covered.... Another absurd thing that happens here in [province in Southern Italy] is the center that serves the school canteen closes [in spring]. So from that day all the children of day cares, or those who are in state or city day cares are out at 13:00. And so actually, full time becomes very reduced part time after that date, from [summer] on.” (Local parents’ association, Italy)*

Some respondents specifically asserted that because of these issues, childcare challenges become *more* difficult, rather than less, when children begin school. This is in contrast to the common notion that school makes organizing childcare simpler due to the availability of a free or heavily subsidized place for children to go for a substantial part of the day, also reflected in the main focus within the literature on ECEC, or childcare for children below school-age. A respondent from Germany demonstrates the time-related challenges of school service times:

*“They can more or less organize child care until the child starts school. When it starts school, everything starts all over again. Primary school often ends at 11am or midday. Then you need child care for lunch and the afternoon... which often ends at 1pm. After-school care often ends at 4pm, which makes it difficult again.” (Parent advocacy group, Germany)*

It is well-recognized within the comparative literature that childcare services which offer longer opening hours are more conducive to full-time work among parents, particularly mothers (Hegewisch & Gornick 2011). This was also reflected in our interviews, with respondents from Sweden commenting that the long opening hours of services generally made it easier for parents to arrange pick-up and drop-off in line with longer working hours. However, a key finding from our interviews is that cultural norms can constrain parents' ability to make use of the full opening hours of a given service. In Sweden, several interviewees made reference to pressure to pick up children earlier than the official closing time. One Swedish interviewee explains how this pressure plays out in practice, with other parents and staff members contributing to parental perceptions that picking up a child too late in the afternoon signifies bad parenting:

*“If you stop working in the factory at 4, then you cannot pick up your children at 3, instead you pick them up at 4.30 or something. And then you need to go grocery shopping and when you get there at 5 or 6 to pick up your child, the child is there alone. Everyone else has left, they have gotten picked up. That is quite stigmatizing. You also get the feeling that the staff sit around and wonder when they can go home soon.” (Parent advocacy organization, Sweden)*

This issue was also present in Slovenia, where a respondent explains:

*“Frequently you’d hear comments how parents struggle to get to kindergarten in time to pick up their child; work days are getting longer and longer. But the fact is that kindergartens that did extend their opening time are not full, because parents somehow manage to pick up kids earlier. This is in part due to the rule that parents have to announce the time of picking up their child upfront (in the beginning of the school year) and they would rather break their legs and organize whatever necessary,*

*like include grandmothers, than admit that they need child care until half past four. On the other side, at that time there is only a few children left in the group and parents don't want to leave their child there until the end. It's parents' self-censorship. And there is also this social pressure on mothers, saying 'What, will you just stay at work?'" (Local family center, Slovenia)*

In both countries, even when childcare services are officially available to parents, cultural norms about what makes a good parent as well as practices among childcare providers can both contribute to limiting parents' ability to make full use of those services, increasing the logistical challenges they face in managing both work and care.

*Space: geographical distance from home or work*

Parents' ability to access a childcare place was repeatedly linked to the issue of distance between an available childcare place and homes or workplaces, a potential challenge which was directly raised by over a third of the sample. Respondents noted that parents prefer closer services in order to reduce travel time and the overall challenge of coordinating work, care and transport.

While parents express preferences for certain childcare services, in many cases parents have little choice over which childcare place they take, due to limited options in a given radius near their home and work. Several respondents noted that even when parents have a legal entitlement to a place, it may pose severe logistical challenges for them if the travel distance is too great or depending on what system of transport is available. For example, in Germany:

*"In [city], half an hour commute by public transport is nothing. It might be that the distance isn't the problem, but what means of transport I have. It could well be that*

*the other end of [city] is also only half an hour away on the underground.” (Regional parent advocacy group, Germany)*

Geographical distance and transport issues can also further exacerbate the challenge of meeting time constraints. For example, a Swedish interviewee gives a personal example, discussing the time it takes to travel from work to the childcare service, including anticipation of potential problems which could arise during travel in order to avoid being late to pick up the child at 4:30pm:

*“I: You have to leave work at 4pm.*

*A: The latest. Quarter past 3pm really. Considering problems with the commute, etc.*

*It takes more than an hour for me, with waiting time, so I have to leave work at quarter past 3pm, sometimes 3pm.” (Parent co-operative, Sweden)*

Like time-related logistical challenges, space-related challenges can also vary in intensity according to institutional structures and cultural norms. For example, in Slovenia, the problem of distance is essentially dictated by the institutional structure which involves a centralized system of allocation of places:

*“We have a centralized waiting list, so it’s fair for everyone. The whole city of [X] has this system and if parents’ first choice was [provider], second one [provider] and third I don’t know which one, they will get into the first one with an available place. And parents will be forced to drive their child to the other side of the city.” (Local childcare provider, Slovenia)*

At the same time, cultural norms regarding children’s independence (or lack thereof) also shape the intensity of space-related logistical challenges. Where children are perceived as unable to travel or be alone, the challenge of getting them from A to B is greater for parents.



However, there was variation in the extent to which children traveling alone or being left in self-care was viewed negatively or positively. In Slovenia, a respondent expresses concern about a lack of supervision for school-age children:

*“And again we have this problem, which I felt was problematic already in socialism, the problem of children being at home alone. Ten year olds locked in flats. There’s no control, they can climb up on a window, they are in front of a television set or play computer games.” (Local parent association, Slovenia)*

This is in contrast to situations in which children are perceived as sufficiently independent to engage in self- or group care with other children. A respondent from a parent association in Germany explains how groups of school-age children travel independently of adults:

*“Q: Who takes the children from school to the after-school care?”*

*A: The children go by themselves.*

*Q: Even at 7 years?*

*A: Yes.” (Regional parent association, Germany)*

#### *Space and time: coordination points and complexity of arrangements*

From our interviews it is clear that the problem of space-time fixity is not specific to one country or to those with limited provision of public childcare services. However, these logistical challenges are often magnified by the limitations of institutional forms of childcare which require children to be picked up and dropped off at particular times of day, often at different buildings, and usually during hours and periods of the year which do not match full-time hours of employment. Thus, in order to make use of these particular forms of care, which are often highly subsidized and/or provide other benefits parents desire (such as the

opportunity for their children to socialize or prepare for transitions to school), parents must find some way of joining up the mismatches between care services and employment.

Prior literature has identified several childcare strategies parents use to overcome these challenges, including children's independent self-care (Polatnik 2002) and the use of multiple or alternative forms of care, including residence-based market providers and/or informal care by family, friends and neighbors, especially grandparents (Le Bihan & Martin 2004; Larsen 2004; Wheelock et al. 2003; Wheelock & Jones 2002).

Such strategies also featured in our sample. As noted previously, a few respondents explicitly mentioned children independently looking after themselves or traveling from one care service to another. However, it was more common for respondents to mention non-institutional forms of childcare as a solution. This included private home-based arrangements such as paid childminders, often specifically referencing a need or preference for greater flexibility. For example, a respondent from Slovenia explains:

*“Kindergartens limit you because you have to pick up your child at a certain time; and those parents who decide for private day-care at home are mostly in such employment or positions where they never know when they will have to stay longer, so they want a more flexible child care. So, they don’t have a problem if they have to call and ask for an additional hour of child care.” (Parents’ association, Slovenia)*

Additionally, and in line with prior literature, the family remained a primary source of private support, with respondents in each country stressing the importance of spouses/partners and grandparents. Some respondents referred to the use of tag-team pick-up and drop-off between parents based on different, possibly flexible work schedules, a strategy which has also been noted in other qualitative studies (Jain et al. 2011, Skinner 2005). Others noted that

grandparents provide a fall-back solution when institutional forms of childcare are unavailable or provide a limited or inflexible service.

These private arrangements are a key way that parents attempt to relieve the pressure of logistical challenges posed by the time and space limitations of school and care services. However, they can also increase the intensity of logistical challenges by increasing the number of 'coordination points' (Skinner 2005) which must be managed.

For example, mixing and matching different forms of care within a single day was often mentioned in the UK (see also Skinner 2005; Wheelock & Jones 2002). This was especially a challenge for larger families with more than one child requiring care, particularly if this required transport to more than one institution, such as a childcare service and a school building. A local childcare provider in the UK explains why one family employs a childminder in addition to using institutional childcare services:

*“Because she's already got children at school and children at playgroup, where parents find it hard to juggle... You know if you've got four young children, to get them to three different places is quite a feat.” (Local childcare provider, UK)*

However, this was not only a problem in countries like the UK and Germany, which are known for providing childcare services for short or part-time hours. In Slovenia, one respondent describes how parents manage to avoid the cultural stigma of leaving children at kindergarten for the full opening hours:

*“So, they are solving this problem in different ways; also with [a] baby sitter who pick up and bring the child home... Or they do it like this: for instance father brings the child in kindergarten and stays therefore a bit longer at work while mother is*

*early at work and can therefore leave earlier to pick the child up.” (Local family center, Slovenia)*

Such strategies were also used in Sweden, often facilitated by flexible working practices:

*“If the father drops off on Monday, the mother picks up in the afternoon. Then the father works late that day because then he is off the hook, he gets home whenever he wants to. It only works if both parents have these flexible jobs, and not everyone does. The mother that picked up in the afternoon can thus drop off on Tuesday and the father can go to work really early. Then he picks up at 4, 4.30. They alternate.”*  
*(Local childcare provider, Sweden)*

While parents use creative solutions to overcome logistical challenges, this comes at the cost of increased complexity of childcare arrangements which can lead to stress and fatigue among parents trying to manage it all. Crucially, several respondents in the UK and Germany pinpointed the stress of organizing these logistics as an explicit factor in parents (usually mothers) reducing their working time or avoiding looking for work altogether. This was especially highlighted for single parents and families with several children:

*“You can definitely see that institutions like day-care centers are less and less useful for large families, because the children are going to different institutions because of their different ages. Grammar school, primary school, kindergarten. And then management is getting complicated and it usually makes more sense to have one parent stay at home and to say, you go and work full-time.” (Parent family advocacy group, Germany)*

*“...lone parents who haven't got a job are going ‘Well, look the whole system is geared up to me walking up and down the street ten times taking my child to nursery, and*

*taking him home again and going back to school. How on earth, HOW ON EARTH, can you expect me to go and get a job?’ ” (Third sector advocacy group and research centre, UK)*

Similarly, in Sweden, the cultural pressure to pick up children early from preschool necessitates the ability to do so, which at least in some cases results in mothers working shorter hours:

*“I: What do the parents do to be able to pick up their children early? Not everyone finishes work at 3 o’clock?*

*A: No, that is really something that should be investigated. How does it work? Are you stealing work hours for this, are you sneaking away from work to pick up your children early? Or, something that is common, that many women go down to 80 percent, they decrease their work hours.” (Parent advocacy organization, Sweden)*

Nevertheless, while the logistical challenge of complex arrangements was present across countries, it seemed to be especially prevalent in contexts where other childcare challenges (a lack of available places, high cost to parents) were also present. For example, in the UK the high cost of childcare has become increasingly recognized as a major challenge for parents (Department for Education 2013; Mulheirn & Shorthouse 2011). From our interviews, one respondent specifically suggested that the reason parents juggle multiple forms of care is to reduce the financial cost of care services:

*“I think there's, it's all about cost, it must, it's about cost. Nobody does that mix and match for no good reason.” (Local childcare provider, UK)*

Similarly, a lack of childcare places during holidays and summers or after school was also linked to more complex childcare arrangements in several countries. A respondent from Italy

describes the issue in detail:

*“The main problem, however, is the length of the vacations. 2 weeks at Christmas, 1 week at Easter, and then the so called “bridges” when there is a single holiday close to a weekend and then it is patched together to become a longer holiday. For a day or two you can organize, but for such long periods it becomes a disaster.”*

*(Parent/family advocacy group, Italy)*

### **Logistical challenges: Towards a fuller understanding of access to childcare**

Space-time fixity – the need to be in a particular place at a particular time – is, broadly speaking, a universal aspect of logistical management experienced by everyone in everyday life. However, for parents, space-time fixity is magnified by the need to organize their children’s lives as well, and in particular to arrange the care and supervision of children considered too young to be left on their own. Logistics become more complex, coordination points multiply and the number of people involved is often considerable.

Nevertheless, space-time fixity may be more or less of a problem depending on whether or not it is experienced as a logistical challenge. Logistical challenges as they apply to childcare can be defined as negative manifestations of space-time fixity, such as rigid hours of care and work, high levels of geographical distance, complex modes of transport and numerous ‘coordination points’. The more intense these challenges and the more of them there are, the greater the difficulty for parents to arrange childcare – to the extent that logistical challenges can impede access to formal childcare, even where in principle places are available.

Our interviews identified such logistical challenges as a key difficulty for parents across countries. In particular, the opening hours of childcare services which did not match working

hours was identified as a problem for families in the majority of our interviews. This was magnified where such hours were rigid rather than flexible, with parents expected to drop off or pick up their children within a very narrow window of time. However, the challenges of such space-time fixity could also be mitigated. Longer opening hours for childcare services and/or more flexible working hours both served to relieve pressure on parents.

Parents' ability to access a childcare place was further linked to the issue of distance between an available childcare place and parents' homes or workplaces. Parents tend to prefer closer services in order to reduce travel time as well as the overall challenge of simultaneously coordinating work, care and transport. Such coordination could sometimes lead to highly complex arrangements, involving various family members, as well as friends and paid childcare workers outside the institutional system of provision.

Such logistical challenges are only one of several types of challenges that parents may face in attempting to organize their childcare. Others include availability of places, cost, and quality: the recognized triad of childcare constraints. These other challenges can diminish or intensify logistical challenges. For example, a lack of affordable childcare (a cost challenge) can intensify logistical challenges as parents try to piece together different forms of childcare to reduce costs. Similarly, where childcare places are scarce (an availability challenge), logistical challenges can increase, for example, due to higher geographical distances travelled to an available place.

The degree of any of these challenges, including specifically logistical challenges which we are most interested in, is partly influenced by micro-level factors: whether a single parent or not, whether working or not. However, they are also influenced by macro-level contextual factors – both cultural norms and institutional structures.

The role of institutional structures in shaping availability, cost and quality has been particularly emphasized previously in the literature. These structures can also shape logistical challenges both directly (via aspects of space-time fixity noted above) and indirectly (via other types of childcare challenges – availability and affordability). Within our analysis, we were surprised to find a high degree of similarity in experiences of logistical challenges across six different childcare systems. However, differences were also apparent, some of which were in line with what might be expected given prior knowledge of these childcare systems. For example, the high cost of care in the UK in addition to its split system were both linked to a high degree of discussion of complexity of arrangements.

Nevertheless, even integrated systems such as Slovenia and Sweden posed logistical challenges for parents, especially where formal availability was out of step with cultural practices. Cultural norms shape parents' perceptions of what is normal or acceptable behavior for themselves and their children. Therefore, like institutional structures, they can increase or decrease the intensity of logistical challenges as parents attempt to meet normative expectations and follow dominant cultural practices. For example, pressure to pick up children before official closing times seemed to intensify logistical challenges in Slovenia and Sweden, while a norm of independent travel and self-care among school children seemed to relieve logistical challenges for some parents in Germany. However, it is important to recognize the complexity of the relationship between cultural norms and individual behaviour, as well as between policy, practice and cultural norms - cultural norms are not fixed and individuals may respond to them in different ways, including by challenging or disregarding norms which are perceived as too costly, or by pressing for changes to policy and practice to be more in line with existing norms (see Himmelweit, 2002).



## **Conclusion**

The research presented here explores the everyday realities parents face in accessing childcare for their children in six European countries. From our interviews in these different countries, a common theme emerged: the practical challenge parents face in coordinating care arrangements around employment and other activities. Across diverse institutional contexts families face similar problems of simultaneously coordinating space and time components to match work and care. Spatially, there is the question of geographical proximity between home, work and care facilities and associated issues of transport. Time considerations, such as the opening hours of childcare services and their relationship with working time are of similar importance. Such concerns factor into whether particular forms of childcare are sufficiently accessible for parents.

Certain childcare infrastructures such as subsidized, full-day childcare places can make some aspects of arranging care easier by relieving the cost burden and associated stress for individual families. Nevertheless, the rigidity of much institutional care, especially those services which are designed primarily for the purpose of child education, is also a prime driver of the logistical challenges parents face. As a consequence, parents look for private arrangements, including paid home-based carers and informal support from friends and family, to manage the limitations of more formal services. However, these solutions may increase the complexity of care arrangements and can lead to stress or attempts to relieve the burden by limiting labor force participation. Accordingly, some of our respondents highlighted the importance of flexible working practices and the role of employers as another core component of a system which facilitates the coordination of work and care.

Our findings are in line with other, usually single-country, qualitative studies which have interviewed parents about their childcare practices and strategies (Jain et al. 2011; Skinner

2005; Schwanen 2007; Schwanen & de Jong 2008; Wheelock et al. 2003). However, for the most part these qualitative insights have not filtered into academic literature or policy debates on childcare access, where the emphasis has remained on improving the supply of formal care services, with little appreciation for the daily struggles parents face and the coping strategies they employ when making arrangements to take advantage of these services.

This suggests that the issues surrounding childcare are more complex than is commonly acknowledged. In particular, parents who do not make use of available services may not be dissuaded solely by alternative factors of affordability or quality, but by difficulties of matching up the time and space constraints of care services and other commitments, including paid employment. Commonly used indicators of childcare availability do not properly account for this issue and as such can lead to potentially misleading conclusions about the effects of childcare provision on maternal employment, for example. Consequently, further research in this area would benefit from attempts to develop a broader concept of access to childcare that includes indicators of logistical challenges in addition to more commonly used measures of the availability of places, their affordability and quality. At the same time, recognition of the particular challenges posed by managing the logistics of care work should also include attention to solutions beyond the childcare system, including the role of employers and flexible working practices.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> See also Jarvis (1999) on the socio-spatial nature of coordinating work and family life.

<sup>2</sup>The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement no. 320116 for the research project FamiliesAndSocieties.

This discussion provides only a brief summary; a full overview of each country's childcare system can be found in Koslowski et al. (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Such as the European Union Survey of Income and Living Standards (EU-SILC) which is commonly used for European assessments of childcare as it is one of the few surveys with detailed and standardized indicators of patterns of childcare use.

<sup>4</sup> Germany had a lower number of interviews than the other countries because one was a small focus group of four participants, but there were at least 10 individuals interviewed for each country. Similarly, interviews in some of the other countries sometimes included participants from more than one organisation.

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## Tables

Table 1: Key indicators of childcare availability

<b>EU Member State</b>	<b>% of children under 3 years in formal care or pre-school (2010)</b>	<b>Average hours of attendance by children under 3 years in formal care or pre-school (2010)</b>	<b>% of children aged 3 to 5 years in pre-school (2010)</b>	<b>Out of school hours care (before and after)</b>	<b>Maternal employment rate, age of youngest child &lt; 3 years (2011)</b>	<b>Maternal employment rate, age of youngest child 3-5 years (2011)</b>
<b>Germany</b>	23	23	94	2010 – 7.4 (age 5-8) 4.9 (age 9-11)	53	65
<b>Hungary</b>	11	30	87	2011 – 58.1 (age 6-8) 43.0 (age 9-11)	60	62
<b>Italy</b>	24	29	96	2010 (after school only)	53	51



				3.8		
				(age 6-		
				10)		
				10.0		
				(age 11-3		
				22.1		
				(age 14-		
				17)		
<b>Slovenia</b>	42	36	86	-	76	86
<b>Sweden</b>	47	33	93	2011	72	81
				84.2		
				(age 6-8)		
				34.8		
				(age 9-		
				11)		
<b>UK</b>	42	16	93	2011,	57	62
				England		
				22.3		
				(age 0-		
				14)		

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Source: OECD Family Database (2015)

Table 2: Descriptive overview of respondent organisations

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of organisations</i>
Germany	11
Hungary	11
Italy	10
Slovenia	10
Sweden	10
UK	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>
<i>Type of organisation</i>	<i>Number of organisations</i>
Parent, family and/or child advocacy group	17
Family support and/or ECEC service provider	14
Parent association	13
Professional association for ECEC providers	6
ECEC trade union	4
Research centre	3
National government ministry	3
Local authority/municipality	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>

Table 3: No. of interviews referencing logistical challenges by total interviews for each country

	Sweden	UK	Italy	Hungary	Germany <sup>4</sup>	Slovenia
<b>Logistical challenges (total)</b>	10/10	10/10	9/10	11/11	8/9	10/10
<b>Geographical distance</b>	6/10	1/10	1/10	3/11	5/9	7/10
<b>Opening times and flexibility</b>	10/10	9/10	9/10	11/11	8/9	9/10
<b>Complexity of arrangements</b>	7/10	10/10	1/10	0/11	4/9	3/10